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Sexually Coercive Tactics Used by University Students: A Clear Role for Primary
Psychopathy

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Abstract

Current research suggests that people with psychopathic traits engage in sexual coercion as an alternative mating strategy. Research overlooks the relation between psychopathic traits and coercive behavior in male and female samples that engage in dating quite frequently. Male and female university students reported on their current relationship styles and their use of minor and severe sexually coercive tactics. Results indicate that primary psychopathy (using the Levenson's SRPS), but not secondary psychopathy, predicts the use of all measures of sexual coercion for both females and males, although males were more likely to exploit an intoxicated partner than females. Additionally, females with high levels of primary psychopathy were more likely to use physical forms of coercion. The findings show that the primary psychopathy features (callousness, charm and selfishness) predict a short-term mating strategy that focuses on gaining sex through minor forms of coercion and manipulation.

Keywords: Primary Psychopathy; Secondary Psychopathy; Sexual Coercion; University Students.

Sexually Coercive Tactics Used by University Students: A Clear Role for Primary Psychopathy

Psychopathy is comprised of personality traits that describe a callous and uncaring interaction with others. This callousness allows people with psychopathy to maintain an impersonal and active sex life (Cleckley, 1976; Hare, 1991). Psychopathy, which is characterized by acting charming and nice, manipulating others, lying, while also lacking guilt over their behavior, can lead people to behave in ways that only serve to satisfy their urges. However, Cleckley (1976) did not emphasize the criminal life of people with psychopathy. Instead, the heartbroken people left behind in the psychopath's wake show the effects of the core personality traits of egocentrism and callousness. Thus, the effects that psychopathic traits might have may be most apparent in young adulthood, when people are learning to negotiate intimate relationships. Specifically, young university samples of men and women may be a prime target to examine sexual coercive strategies and the effects of psychopathic traits on their use.

Psychopathic traits have proven to be robust predictors of sexually aggressive and antisocial behaviors including latent (DuGue & DiLillo, 2005) and overt acts (Kosson, Kelly, & White, 1997). Research into the strategies people use to gain sex must consider minor forms as well as severe forms of sexual coercion. Based on Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumière, and Quinsey (2007), some strategies which may not be classed as criminal or violent may successfully serve the purposes of people with psychopathy; that is, psychopathy serves to increase access to sex. This is because people with psychopathic traits engage in sex without the usual emotional attachment, which makes it easy to use charm, flattery, and outright lie to manipulate the target. Due to the deceitful abilities of psychopaths, they are able to hide their true character from the general public and professionals when necessary (see Millon, 1998). It may be possible that through the use of more subtle tactics to encourage sexual activity,

people with psychopathic traits carry out their coercion without ‘breaking the law’. Since psychopathic traits are considered to be adaptive in certain contexts, such as in competing for potential mates (Harris, et al., 2007; Mealey, 1997), research with normative samples is needed. In particular, the core personality traits are expected to be associated with the minor forms of coercion, including using charm and manipulating other people’s weaknesses to gain sex. Psychopathy, particularly in a non-offending sample, may be related to minor forms of coercive tactics, since sexual assault is theorized to be due to attitudes toward women than to the core affective features of psychopathic traits (Malamuth, 2003; Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). The features of psychopathy, such as charm and manipulation, would seem to be useful for conning someone to have sex, but may not lead to severe forms of coercion. Based on the psychopaths’ lack of behavioral controls and empathy deficits, individuals who willingly apply pressure and readily aggress in order to attain casual sex are likely to be high in psychopathy (Malamuth, Huppin, & Paul, 2005).

The above would seem to argue for an evolutionary benefit to psychopathy, mainly due to the primary features. A Darwinian view of psychopathy was proposed by Harris and colleagues (2007). Few cheaters among a larger population of altruistic individuals would favor successful mating for the few who use an alternative deceptive, selfish, callous, and aggressive strategy (Harris, et al., 2007; see Mealey, 1997). A short-term mating strategy that typifies men with psychopathy (Jonason, Li, Webster, & Schmitt, 2009) seems to be consistent with a good evolutionary strategy. Indeed, a strong desire for sexual activity along with early initiation of sexual activity is associated with delinquency and other antisocial behaviors (French & Dishion, 2003). This suggests that there are genes that favor early onset to sexual activity and personality traits that make young men attractive to women, such as charm and glibness. In order for the vigilant altruistic individuals to overlook the alternative strategy used by people with psychopathy, these aggressive, selfish, and callous people would

be better off avoiding detection. Thus, more minor forms of sexual coercion should be examined in non-offending samples (Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). The implication is that moderately high levels of psychopathy could make young people use conning and callous behaviors to be successful in dating and sexual pursuits.

Psychopathy can be divided based on the behavioral versus personality features (Hare, 1991; Hare, Hart, & Harpur, 1991; Harpur, Hare, & Hakstian, 1989). Primary psychopathy reflects the core personality features that include interpersonal and affective characteristics of callousness, deceitfulness, and a lack of remorse (Hare, et al., 1991). This factor is associated with coercive behavior (Blackburn, 1998) and superficial relations (Raine, 1985). Secondary psychopathy refers to antisocial behaviors, an unstable and self-defeating lifestyle. The behaviors reflect impulsivity, intolerance of frustration, lack of long-term goals, lack of responsibility, and poor behavioral control (Levenson, Kiehl, & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Research suggests that the presence of primary personality traits predicts sexual aggression, while the secondary/behavioral traits predict offending in general (Porter, et al., 2000). Therefore, the primary traits may be most important in predicting sexually coercive behaviors.

While research has focused on sexual coercion used by males, very little research has compared the sexually coercive tactics used by males and females (Struckman-Johnson, Struckman-Johnson, & Anderson, 2003). The sexually coercive tactics used by men and women differ somewhat. Men reported experiencing seductive tactics which included the woman taking off her clothes (41.1%) and manipulative tactics, such as the woman threatening to harm herself (5.5%) slightly more than women reported experiencing. Women reported being on the receiving end of more lying (42.4%) from their partners, but also more physically coercive tactics, such as kissing and touching (70.8%) and being taken advantage of when intoxicated (42.1%). Both males and females show similar behaviors when trying to convince a sexual partner to say 'yes' after having been refused (Schatzel-Murphy, Harris,

Knight, & Milburn, 2009; Struckman-Johnson, et al., 2003). However, highly aggressive males employ tactics that go beyond exaggeration; intimidation, threats and force are used as a strategy to increase chances of sexual compliance (Struckman-Johnson, et al., 2003; Warkentin & Gidycz, 2007). Thus, it is evident that research into coercive tactics used by men and women to gain sex with a partner should include minor and severe forms of sexual coercion.

Despite prior research on gender differences, research that subsumes both the antisocial behavior of non-incarcerated female populations and explores the heterogeneous 2-factor structure distinction between primary and secondary psychopathy (for example, Chiselko & Jones, 2007) is extremely scarce. Thus, evidence suggests that psychopathy may be expressed differently amongst female offenders in comparison to their male counterparts (Forouzan & Cooke, 2005; Hamburger, Lilienfeld, & Hogben, 1996; Nicholls, Ogloff, Brink, & Spidel, 2005; Sevecke, Lehmkuhl, & Krischer, 2009; Vitale, Smith, Brinkley, & Newman, 2002). Finally, investigations to explore gender differences with regards to sexual aggression in psychopathic non-offenders are seemingly non-existent.

The present study examined the sexually coercive tactics used by a university sample of men and women. Participants were asked to complete measures of the two factors of primary and secondary psychopathy. Also, current relationship status was assessed. We examined whether gender and primary/ secondary psychopathy could statistically predict the use of less severe and the more severe forms of sexually coercive tactics. We were interested in whether women with psychopathic traits were more likely to use some forms of sexual coercion than men. Finally, we examined whether people who stated they were in shorter-term relationships were higher in both forms of psychopathy.

Method

Participants

Participants were 150 university students. Most participants were female (64%) and between the ages of 18-49 ($M=21.9$, $SD=3.3$). Participants who volunteered for participation took a booklet with questionnaires and returned them to the investigator when they were completed. Most participants stated that they were single and sexually active (24%), or in a medium-term relationship (duration of six months to three years; 25%). Twelve percent stated they were single, but not sexually active.

Measures and Materials

Levenson, Kiehl, and Fitzpatrick's Self-Report of Psychopathy Scale (LSRPS; Levenson, et al., 1995). This scale was developed to assess dimensional differences in psychopathic traits in normative samples and has been extensively tested with undergraduate students. Consistent with diagnostic measures of psychopathy, such as the Psychopathy Checklist – Revised (Harpur, et al., 1989), two factors were found: primary and secondary psychopathy. Statements such as “Looking out for myself is my top priority” represented primary psychopathy; statements such as “I am often bored” represented secondary psychopathy. The items are measured in a Likert format with ‘strongly agree’(4), ‘agree somewhat’(3), ‘disagree somewhat’(2) and ‘strongly disagree’(1). These two scales have been shown to be differentiated as would be expected, such that secondary psychopathy was more related to heightened anxiety and sensation seeking (Levenson, et al., 1995). Also, the LSRPS has been cross-validated with college students (Lynam, Whiteside, & Jones, 1999), showing a differentiation of the primary and secondary scales on behavioural measures as well. Primary and secondary psychopathy scores were created by using the sum of the overall scores for the primary ($M=32.27$, $SD=8.07$) and secondary ($M=24.73$, $SD=5.25$) scales. As in

prior research, the internal consistency of the primary scale was higher than the secondary, although both were acceptable (Cronbach's alpha of .88 and .78, respectively).

Sexual coercion. Sexually coercive tactics that the participants may have used to encourage sexual activity with another person were measured by the Postrefusal Sexual Persistence scale (PSP; Struckman-Johnson, et al., 2003). The PSP is separated into subcategories that assess coercive tactics in increasing severity: sexual arousal (e.g., persistently kissing and touching them), emotional manipulation (e.g., questioning their sexuality), alcohol and drug intoxication (e.g., purposefully getting them drunk first), and physical force (e.g., using physical harm). We omitted the emotional manipulation item regarding lies, because it overlapped with the primary psychopathy items and might have inflated the relations between coercion and primary psychopathy. Participants were asked to indicate “yes”(1) or “no”(0) whether or not they used each tactic after their partner had indicated ‘no’ to their sexual advance. Participants who had never used the tactics in a subscale were assigned a “no” or 0 value, and participants who had used one or more of the tactics in it were assigned a “yes” or 1 value. These scales have been developed for use with female and male samples, and they have been shown to differentiate male and female university samples in the U.S. (Struckman-Johnson, et al., 2003). We used the subscales to predict tactic use as a function of gender and psychopathy.

Procedure

Participants were given a questionnaire booklet which included these two questionnaires, as well as two others, which are not used here. The order in which these questionnaires were presented was counterbalanced. Participants filled out the questionnaires by following the instructions on each page of the questionnaire booklet. Participants either filled them out returned them directly to the researcher, or they placed the completed questionnaires in a box that was collected.

Results

First, the responses indicated that males reported using all four forms of sexual coercion more than females, namely (1) sexual arousal and touching (81.5% for males versus 52.1% for females), (2) emotional manipulation (75.9% versus 40.6%), (3) exploiting by intoxication (61.1% versus 19.8%), (4) and physical force (37.0% versus 12.5%). The first step in the analysis was to assess which variables had the most influence on the sexually coercive tactics used. In particular, we aimed to investigate whether gender and primary (or secondary) psychopathy influence sexually coercive tactics. It was further predicted that male participants were high on psychopathic personality traits would report using more sexually coercive tactics than females with psychopathic personality traits. To test this prediction, a logistic regression was carried out to assess the interaction between gender and primary psychopathy in relation to the PSP subscales. Gender, primary, and secondary psychopathy were entered on Step 1 and the two-way interactions were entered on Step 2. The results are shown in Table 1. Primary psychopathy significantly predicted use of sexual arousal ($B=.10$, $SE=.04$, $p<.01$) and emotional manipulation ($B=.12$, $SE=.04$, $p<.01$). With every unit increase in primary psychopathy, there was an 11% increase in the odds of using sexual arousal ($OR=1.11$) and a 13% increase in the odds of emotionally manipulating their partner to gain sex. Primary psychopathy significantly predicted use of intoxication ($B=.14$, $SE=.04$, $p<.01$). With every unit increase in primary psychopathy, there was a 15% increase in the odds of using intoxication as a coercive tactic ($OR=1.15$). Also, females showed a 62% decrease in the odds of using intoxication ($OR=.38$; $B= -.96$, $SE=.44$, $p<.05$).

Step 2, when the interactions were entered, was only significant in predicting use of physical force ($\chi^2(2) = 10.54$, $p < .01$). Specifically, the interaction between gender and primary psychopathy was significant ($B= -.29$, $SE=.11$, $p<.01$). The effect of primary psychopathy was stronger for females' ($OR=1.33$) than for males' ($OR=1.03$) use of physical

force. Solving the regression equation for low (-1SD) and high (+1SD) primary psychopathy, and producing the probability of engaging in physical coercion, revealed the stronger effect for females. At low levels of psychopathy, females were very unlikely to use physical force (1% probability). However, at high levels, females were almost 50% likely to use physical force (44%). Males were similarly likely to use physical force regardless of their high (33%) or low (24%) primary psychopathy traits.

These results indicate that secondary psychopathy had no significant effect once controlling for the effect of primary psychopathy. Instead, participants who have high primary psychopathic traits are more likely to use all sexually coercive tactics. Further, females will only use the more severe forms of sexual coercion in their relationships if they are high on primary psychopathy.

Another aim was to test the level of psychopathy based on the type of relationship the participant endorsed for themselves. People with psychopathy were expected to have short-term relationships. Primary and secondary psychopathy differed by relationships status, $F(5,126)=2.67, p<.05$ and $F(5,126)=2.57, p<.05$, respectively. Contrasts were performed examining the early relationship and single categories versus the longer term categories. Table 2 shows the means and standard deviations of primary and secondary psychopathy in each relationship category. Primary psychopathy was highest in the early relationships and single-sexually active categories and these were significantly different from married, long-term relationships, and single-not sexually active categories. Secondary psychopathy was also highest in early relationships and contrasts revealed higher psychopathy for early relationships and both single categories versus long-term relationships. Further, we found higher levels for males of both primary ($M=37.64, SD=7.13$) and secondary ($M=28.02, SD=5.11$) psychopathy than females ($M=29.09, SD=7.05$ and $M=22.87, SD=4.71$,

respectively), $F(1,126)=39.83$, $p<.001$ and $F(1,126)=35.57$, $p<.001$, respectively. Interactions between gender and relationship status were nonsignificant.

Discussion

As predicted, psychopathic traits statistically predicted university students' attempts to gain sex after being refused. This finding is consistent with research that indicates that psychopathy is a major indicator of the use of sexual coercion in sexual relationships with others (Harris, et al., 2007; Lalumiere & Quinsey, 1996). Specifically, primary psychopathy predicted the use of sexually coercive tactics, and the escalation in the severity of coercion resulted in better prediction. The finding that primary psychopathy in particular predicts the use of sexual coercion is supported by descriptions and research of primary psychopaths as more self-confident, manipulative, and egocentric (Brinkley, Diamond, Magaletta, & Heigel, 2008; Cleckley, 1976; Miller, Gaughan, & Pryor, 2008).

This is the first known study to show that coercive tactics are used by both men and women with psychopathic traits. The findings support and extend research which shows that college men with psychopathic traits reported using sexually coercive tactics such as physical force, threats, and manipulative intoxication (i.e., getting someone deliberately drunk to take advantage of them; Kosson, et al., 1997).

Primary psychopathic traits were generally most important in predicting sexually coercive behaviour after being refused sex. When controlling for primary psychopathy, the behavioral features of psychopathy, such as consistently getting into trouble, and being impulsive and irresponsible, did not significantly predict the use of any coercive tactics. Gender was only a significant predictor in one of the models. That is, men were more likely than women to use the alcohol intoxication of their partner for their sexual gain. However, primary psychopathy was most important in predicting the use of coercive tactics for sex.

The traits related to primary psychopathy are argued to be evolutionarily helpful for

men, who must compete with each other for access to females (Harris, et al., 2007; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). This means that having primary psychopathic traits, such as being charming, shallow, and cold-hearted, serves to influence others while keeping one's emotional involvement low; this allows men with these traits to go from woman to woman. Indeed our results are consistent with other research linking psychopathy to short-term mating strategies (Jonason, et al., 2009). These primary traits would be selected for in evolution and would give way to partner poaching and other sexual deviance behaviors (Schmitt, 2009; Schmitt & Buss, 2001). Consistent with these theories, the present study suggests that the traits which were indicative of impulsivity and behavioral problems were not uniquely associated with the use of sexual coercive tactics. Moreover, people with high impulsive traits and behavioral problems were just as likely to be in non-sexually active categories as in sexually-active categories. People who are unpredictable do not make good long-term mates and they are not the mate-seekers that people who are selfish, callous, and charming seem to be. Thus, traits that suggest boldness are useful during the time when males are young and striving to attract as many mates as they can.

One thing to take away from Harris and colleagues' (2007) theory is that more violent forms of sexual coercion are not helpful for attracting many females. This is supported by Malamuth's (2003) model which proposes that psychopathy operates independently from other factors in predicting sexual violence and aggression. Indeed, in the present study, one aspect of sexual coercive tactics that was not predicted by males' primary psychopathy was physical force when refused sex. That is, men with high levels of primary psychopathy were not more likely than men with low levels to use physical force. Malamuth's assertion is that while psychopathic traits might indicate a general disposition toward antisocial behaviour, sexual aggression stems more from hostile attitudes toward women, rape-myth acceptance, and sexual dominance attitudes (Christopher, Madura, & Weaver, 1998; Lyndon, White, &

Kadlec, 2007; Schatzel-Murphy, et al., 2009). People with psychopathic traits try to control and persuade others for their own personal gain. In terms of cost benefit for gaining access to sex, minor forms of coercion are best suited to the 'psychopath' (Mealey, 1997); however, when coercive methods fail to work, they may resort to physical force.

While primary psychopathic traits might serve men in their dating pursuits and thus be highly selected in the evolution of humans, these traits might not serve women equally (Mealey, 1997). Presence of primary traits puts women at risk for more severe forms of sexual coercion. While men and women both use similar sexually coercive tactics, women who exhibit sexual coercion seem to do so for different reasons than men (Christopher, et al., 1998; Schatzel-Murphy, et al., 2009). For example, women might engage in coercion when they perceive conflict in their relationship and when they have a previous history of aggression (Christopher, et al., 1998). Indeed, people with psychopathic traits generally perceive a high level of conflict in their adolescent relationships (Muñoz, Kerr, & Besic, 2008) and in their adult romantic relationships (Savard, Sabourin, & Yvan, 2006), and are aggressive people.

Regardless of the differences, primary psychopathy traits seem to grant women the same propensity to engage in sexually coercive behavior. In the present study, women who were conning, callous, and manipulative were more likely to resort to violent methods when rebuked. Thus, females had high primary psychopathy were more likely to use the most severe form of coercion, which is physical restraint. Given that women rarely resort to physical sexual coercion, they might have to be emotionally unresponsive to other people's feelings to be able to engage in violence. The primary and secondary subtypes are supported in incarcerated females (Brinkley, et al., 2008; Kennealy, Hicks, & Patrick, 2007), and the subtypes also appear to predict coercive tactics in a university sample of women.

The present findings must be considered in light of several limitations. These findings need to be replicated using other measures than self-report. Also, future research should include more measures that look at male hostile attitudes (Christopher, et al., 1998). For example, examining the relative contribution of conflict, attitudes, and personality may be related to the use of sexual coercive tactics. Further, replication of these findings using a psychiatric or forensic sample may give the results found here greater generalizability to poorer functioning groups. In such a population, the behavioral aspects of psychopathy may hold greater weight. Also, other disorders, such as narcissistic and borderline personality disorders ((Hull, Clarkin, & Yeomans, 1993; Sansone, Barnes, Muennich, & Wiederman, 2008), are related to sexual coercion and poor regulation in sexual relationships. For example, borderline personality disorder may be responsible for females' risky sexual behavior such as persisting with their partner when rejected; psychopathy more often co-occurs with borderline features in females (Strand & Belfrage, 2005). Finally, people with narcissistic personality use sexual coercion as well (e.g., Bushman, Bonacci, van Dijk, & Baumeister, 2003). While the primary scale of psychopathy included manipulation and lying, these narcissistic traits were assessed along with the more callous and affective features. Therefore, further research, including the three factor model outlined by Cooke and Michie (2001), could be used to tease apart the affective and interpersonal contributions.

Robust effects for males' use of sexual persistence after refusal were found despite a greater sample of females in this study. This gives us confidence in our results. We examined different forms of sexual coercion used by a sample of young adults who are learning to negotiate romantic relationships. Research suggests that primary and secondary traits overlap a great deal in female offenders. Thus, our non-referred sample of females may allow us to better able to tease apart the effects of primary versus secondary traits on sexual deviance. Further, women with primary psychopathy traits responded to rejection with greater levels of

coercion to the point of physical force. Thus, these findings suggest interventions with women should focus on the affective and interpersonal features of psychopathy in the expression of aggression and violence in their domestic relationships (see e.g., Odgers & Moretti, 2002). For example, women with the affective traits of psychopathy tend to manipulate their relationships to hurt others (e.g., Silverthorn & Frick, 1999). However, for men, hostile masculinity may be more important than affective features for physical sexual coercion (Malamuth, 2003).

People with psychopathic traits try to control and persuade others for their own personal gain, including using sexually coercive tactics. Both men and women use these sexually coercive tactics when refused sex and their use are partly dependent upon a selfish disregard for other people. When coercive methods fail to work, they may resort to using physical force to gain sex with others. Because people with psychopathy more often stay in short-term dating relationships, they can act in devious ways and expect to have another partner to come along and replace them.

Table 1. Logistic regressions predicting the use of sexually coercive tactics with gender, and psychopathy (Step 1), and the interaction between gender and psychopathy (Step 2).

	Gender (1 female)		Primary Psychopathy		Secondary Psychopathy		Primary*Gender		Secondary*Gender	
	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR	B	OR
		95% CI		95% CI		95% CI		95% CI		95% CI
Sexual Arousal	-0.66	0.52 (.21 – 1.28)	.10**	1.11 (1.03 – 1.19)	0.01	1.01 (.91 – 1.12)	-0.04	0.96 (.82 – 1.14)	0.1	1.11 (.89 – 1.39)
Emotional Manipulation	-0.61	0.54 (.23 – 1.30)	.12**	1.13 (1.04 – 1.22)	0.05	1.05 (.94 – 1.16)	0.06	1.06 (.90 – 1.25)	-0.14	0.87 (.70 – 1.09)
Intoxication	-.96*	0.38 (.16 – .91)	.14***	1.15 (1.06 – 1.25)	0.04	1.04 (.93 – 1.17)	0.09	1.1 (.92 – 1.30)	-0.16	0.85 (.67 – 1.08)
Physical Force	-8.44*	0 (.00 – .33)	-0.27	0.76 (.58 – 1.25)	0.2	1.22 (.83 – 1.81)	.29**	1.34 (1.08 – 1.66)	-0.09	0.91 (.69 – 1.21)

Note: * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$. Step 2 (including interaction terms) for predicting physical force was significant ($X^2(2) = 10.54, p < .01$). Step 2 was nonsignificant for sexual arousal ($X^2(2) = .84, p = ns$), emotional manipulation ($X^2(2) = 1.55, p = ns$), and intoxication ($X^2(2) = 2.00, p = ns$).

Table 2. Means and standard deviations of psychopathy as a function of relationship status.

Measures	Married		Long term relationship		Medium-term relationship		Early relationship		Single/divorced sexually-active		Single/divorced not-sexually active	
	(n=11)		(n=23)		(n=34)		(n=21)		(n=33)		(n=16)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Primary Psychopathy	30.91 ¹	8.87	29.26 ^{2a}	7.07	30.68	6.67	34.57 ¹²³	8.96	35.24 ^a	8.21	28.38 ³	8.05
Secondary Psychopathy	24.27	5.41	21.65 ¹²³	4.89	24.00	5.69	25.95 ¹	5.32	26.15 ²	4.81	24.94 ³	5.57

Note: Psychopathy means with the same superscript denote significant simple contrasts.

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